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ABSTRACT

The question of what influences the acquisition of literacy skills in a second language is addressed. A selected review of the literature shows that prior literacy in the native language greatly increases the ability of elementary school aged children to become literate in a second language. The implications for limited English proficient (LEP) students as well as students in immersion programs are highlighted with a final discussion of the political realities and ramifications. It is concluded that the expenditure of funds to foster the English language literacy of LEP learners will have long-range benefits that far outweigh short-term financial gains. Contains 8 references. (Author/LB)

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"Back to Basics:" Literacy for Second Language Learners in the Public Schools[1]

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The question of what influences the acquisition of literacy skills in a second language is addressed. A selected review of the literature shows that prior literacy in the native language greatly increases the ability of elementary school aged children to become literate in a second language. The implications for LEP students as well as students in immersion programs are highlighted with a final discussion of the political realities and ramifications.

The "back to basics" movement in American education has urged us to return to the time-honored goals of public elementary and secondary schooling: the three 'R's of Readin', Writin' and Rithmetic. The President's wife, Barbara Bush, has put her considerable energy into the goal of promoting literacy—Reading and Writing—for America's youth. Nineteen ninety is called the International Year for Literacy.

In light of these facts, it seems to be a good time for us, as second-language teachers, to turn our attention to the literacy skills of our students. What is the best way for second-language learners to become literate in their second language? This paper will summarize research relevant to this issue and suggest some general approaches we can take.

The primary focus here will be on the limited English proficient, or LEP, student—the learner of English as a second language in the public schools. But this discussion will also have implications for language immersion programs in the public schools which are designed for majority children.

Before we begin to look at this issue, we need to make a fundamental distinction. This is the distinction between a second-language learner's mastery of *basic communication skills* in the new language, and her proficiency in the use of *school language*.[2] In basic oral communication in the second language, the learner can use context to help her to understand and to encode meaningful messages: gesture, physical objects in the environment, and the ongoing and repeti-

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the MinneTESOL Conference, Fall 1989.

2 Jim Cummins (1981a, 1981b) refers to BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills) and CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency). Here, I use the term "school language" to refer to Cummins' notion of CALP.

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tive patterns of social interaction can help the learner to interact meaningfully in the second language. But in school language, communication is context reduced: the contextual cues are missing. The learner must rely primarily on linguistic cues to meaning and must learn to manipulate the language logically. Think, for example, of what is involved in reading the following in a chemistry book:

> *Although the Periodic System does not embrace or depend upon any particular theory of atomic structure, it certainly must agree with any such theory, and vice versa.* (Rochow, p. 13)

Here there may be few illustrations or outside context to help; the learner has to manipulate the language logically. Or think of what is involved in taking a multiple-choice test. There are no contextual cues here: no pictures, no gestures, no human interaction. In fact, the choice among A, B, C or D often balances on the choice of a single word, like 'might' vs. 'must', or a choice among options like 'A and B but not C', 'all of the above' and 'none of the above'—where the student may be deliberately misled by the test-maker, and where selection of the correct answer (again) depends on the ability to manipulate the language logically. Much of formal education aims at teaching students to process and use school language: language in which meaning is represented with minimal contextual support. When we refer to "literacy" in a second language, we must remember that we refer to more than the simple ability to decode letters or to copy letters down on paper. We use the term "literacy" at the level of meaning, as the ability to understand the *meaning* of what one is reading when extra-linguistic context is reduced, and to write making one's *meaning* clear to readers who are not physically present.

Let us turn to the issue of literacy in a second language. What is the best way to acquire literacy skills in a second language? Should students learn to read first in their native language, or in the target language? Swain (1981) cites the evidence on this point: it is very clear that children do best when they *learn to read first in their native language*. The ability to deal with decontextualized school language seems to transfer quite easily from the native language to the second language. But the initial development of that ability seems to be much easier when the learner is working with the native language. This is true not only for LEP children in ESL programs, but also for majority children in language immersion programs. Swain describes two studies, one with LEP learners and one with immersion learners. The LEP study was done with Navajo students at Rock Point, who, according to Swain (1981)

> *used to be educated in English only, and their performance on standardized tests of English remained continuously below the performance expected for their grade level. In 1971 a bilingual program was set up in which literacy was first introduced in*

> *Navajo, from kindergarten through grade 2. After children learned to read in Navajo, they were introduced to English reading. The program through to grade 6 continued to involve instruction in both languages. Students were administered standardized tests of English achievement and the results were compared, among other groups, to those of previous students at Rock Point who had not had bilingual education.* (p. 24)

The results? With each successive year, the children in the bilingual program scored progressively higher in *English* literacy-related tasks than did the children educated in English only. That is, the way to English literacy for these children was by means of literacy first in Navajo.

In French immersion programs, English-speaking children in Canada are taught a standard curriculum for their grade level, but the material is taught entirely in French, their second language. The children learn to read first in the second language, and are only introduced to English reading in the second grade. Swain describes the well known success of these French immersion children in oral interpersonal communication in their second language. They are

> *able to argue in French, to contradict, to play games (including language games), to change topics, to exchange information, to make jokes, to laugh at them, and so on ... But it would be inaccurate to suggest that their French was flawless. It was not, and is not, even at higher grade levels. At the same grade level that the immersion children were demonstrating their ability to use and understand French in face-to-face interactions, the performance of immersion children on a standardized test of French language skills placed them at approximately the 16th percentile relative to the native French-speaking population on whom the test was standardized.* (Swain 1981, pp. 23-24)

That is, their French school language lagged far behind their oral communication skills in French. Tests also showed that these children had very low scores on measures of their (native) English school language but once they were taught to read in English, they quickly caught up with their English-educated peers on measured language skills. What is most interesting is this: once these children developed literacy skills in their native language, their literacy in the second language also improved markedly. Even here, with immersion programs, so highly regarded as successful, it seems that literacy in the native language is fundamental to successful literacy in the second language.

There are two types of immersion programs in Canada: early immersion, in

which children learn to read first in the second language, and only later in their native language; and late immersion, in which children first achieve literacy in their native language, while studying the second language a few minutes a day, and in the 7th grade are totally immersed in the second language in their study of regular school subjects (Swain 1974). How do these two types of programs compare in terms of the L2 literacy skills imparted to the students? The students in *late immersion*, already literate in their L1, become literate in the L2 *much faster* than the early immersion students: late immersion students require only 1200 hours of immersion to reach comparable levels of literacy with early immersion children who have had 4000 hours of immersion (Swain 1981, p. 25). Here again is evidence that we learn second-language literacy skills best when we have first become literate in our native language.

Let us now turn to the question of the amount of time it takes second-language learners to learn the L2. Cummins (1981a) indicates that it takes 2-3 years for immigrants in all-English programs to master the *oral*, context-supported language: the ability to converse in the language in ordinary day-to-day interactions. But how long does it typically take a second-language learner to achieve *literacy* in a second language? And how long does it take a second-language learner to catch up in academic subject areas? Collier (1989) provides an extremely thorough review of all the studies currently available in the published literature on the acquisition of literacy skills by LEP students in English-only and in bilingual programs, and by immersion students in both early and late immersion programs, and on these language learners' success in academic content areas. Collier's conclusions ought to be profoundly troubling to language educators in the Minnesota public schools. Basically, it takes LEP students a much longer time to learn to read and write in a second language than to speak in that language. Their oral skills develop relatively quickly, but their literacy-related skills are much slower to develop.

The speed with which L2 literacy may be mastered differs in *bilingual* programs as opposed to *English-only* programs. Let us take bilingual programs first. Collier concludes that LEP students in *bilingual* programs are in the best possible situation: they learn to read first in their native language, and later in the second language.[1] But even under these best of conditions, it takes these students as little as 2 years to master math and simple language skills, but from 4 to 7 years to catch up with their native-English-speaking classmates in literacy-related skills and in mastery of academic content.

But of course very few LEP students in Minnesota are in *bilingual* programs. How long does it take to become literate in English, in *English-only* programs? Here, the results seem to depend upon two factors, which are sometimes related: (1) whether the immigrants are already literate in their native lan-

1 Collier argues that in all such bilingual programs, content courses should continue to be offered in the native language until the children are 12. This is because native skills in the school language continue to develop until that age.

guage, and (2) their age of arrival in the U.S. It seems that children who already are literate in their native language, and who are 8 to 12 years old when they enter English-only programs, take only a little longer than children in bilingual programs to become literate in English and to catch up in mastery of content: 5 to 7 years. These are somewhat encouraging results, since Minnesota favors English-only programs for LEP students. But what of learners who are under 8 or over the age of 12 when they arrive in the U.S.? Collier says:

> *Young arrivals with no schooling in their first language in either their home country or the host country may take ... possibly as long as 7 to 10 years [to master] ... reading, social studies and science, or indeed, [they may] never. Very little longitudinal research has been conducted in this area, however.* (Collier 1989, p. 527)

Basically, then, we do not know much for sure about younger arrivals. The little evidence we have on the performance of these younger children, many of whom are not already literate in their native language when they arrive, is negative: they may take much longer to achieve literacy and to master academic content in English than eight to twelve year olds, and many of them never seem to equal their native-English-speaking classmates, no matter how long they continue. Possibly these are the children of whom it might be said, following Swain, that they are *submerged* in English, rather than immersed; some never rise to the surface. But, Collier cautions that more research is needed on children whose age of arrival is eight or under; almost no longitudinal research has been been done to study their acquisition of school language and school content in the L2.

Preliminary results in a study (Dailey et al., in progress) on the writing skills of Southeast Asian learners at the Highland Secondary Complex in St. Paul may help to shed some light on the skills of these early arrivals. Preliminary analysis of the data in this study seems to show that eighth grade children who had arrived early and begun their study in English-only programs in kindergarten or first grade wrote the best of all the LEP learners in the study (including later arrivals who were college freshmen at the time of the study)—and the kindergarten/first grade arrivals seemed to write far better than children who had arrived as early as the second and third grades! That is, there seems, at this stage of the analysis, to be a big difference in writing ability between learners whose study was uninterrupted, and learners whose school years were interrupted—even by missing only the first two years. As we shall see below, uninterrupted schooling may be a key ingredient in the recipe for academic success of LEP learners. But clearly we need more research on the needs and skills of LEP learners whose age of arrival is eight or under.

What about adolescent arrivals to English-only programs? Collier says:

> *Adolescent arrivals who have had no L2 exposure and who are not able to continue academic work in their first language while they are acquiring their second language do not have enough time left in high school to make up the lost years of academic instruction. Without special assistance, these students may never reach the 50th NCE or may drop out before completing high school. This is true both for adolescents with a good academic background and for those whose schooling has been limited or interrupted.* (Collier 1989, p. 527)

Assuming it is true that it takes some 7 years to acquire literacy skills in a second language, simple math will tell us that a 16-year-old does not have 7 years of public schooling left in which to gain literacy skills in English. And, while trying to learn English in English-only programs, these students are also missing out on their schooling in the content areas of science, social studies, history, health education and so on. What adolescent can avoid boredom when schooling consists only of language study and either classes in content areas which do not involve the development of higher-level thinking skills (like study hall and P.E.), or mainstream content classes where they lack both the requisite background information and the language skills to understand?

It is important to remember that many S.E. Asian adolescent arrivals have had their academic careers seriously interrupted by years spent in relocation camps. Such learners may lack many concepts which we consider basic to further academic growth; one such adolescent learner of whom I know, a very bright boy, when shown a globe, asked what all the blue was! Collier concludes:

> *Consistent, uninterrupted cognitive academic development in all subjects throughout students' schooling is more important than the number of hours of L2 instruction for successful academic achievement in a second language.* (p. 527)

That is, the research which Collier has examined shows that students' ability to use school English in content classes depends more upon their knowledge of the content itself, than upon the number of hours they have spent in English-language classes.[1] Their understanding of the content seems to provide them with the presuppositions and assumptions they need to be able to work with the language appropriately: in some sense, it might be said to provide context for their

1 Schema theory can, of course, provide a framework for explaining this phenomenon. A great deal of research on schema theory has supported the view that if a learner can activate a relevant content schema before reading a text, that learner's comprehension will be greatly enhanced -- and in fact, that possession of such a relevant schema is more important for comprehension than the learner's mastery of specific vocabulary terms in the reading (cf. Omaggio 1986, pp. 100-2)

language use in those classes. In this view, LEP children whose academic studies have been interrupted by years in relocation camps may be the children who are most at risk, because they may lack knowledge of basic content, and this knowledge may be more important than their mastery of specific English language skills. Researchers on English for academic purposes at the university level have reached similar conclusions: graduate students consistently report that their English grammar books, which teach them sentence-level rules out of context, do not prepare them to understand English prose in the context of their fields. A common complaint goes something like this, "I understand every sentence, but I do not understand the whole paragraph." Understanding of the whole paragraph usually involves some understanding of the academic field, and of the presuppositions and assumptions which people in the field bring to the writing.

To summarize then, this brief survey of the research literature seems to show that the best way to promote literacy in a second language is for learners to first become literate in their native language, and then in the second language. Under these conditions, it may take from 4-7 years for learners to become truly literate in their second language. Learners who are not already literate in the native language may take much longer to become literate in the second language. A matter of great concern for LEP education is—while they are becoming literate in the second language, these learners fall years behind in their knowledge of content in science, social studies, geography, health and so on.

So, what are the practical implications—for parents, language teachers and language program administrators—of this brief summary and synthesis of research on second language literacy?

Most obviously, we must adjust our expectations of second-language learners in the public schools. We cannot expect them to master either *literacy or content skills* in the second language until several years after they have achieved acceptable *oral fluency* in the language.

Then, we should explore ways in which we can adjust our curriculum in accordance with these changed expectations. My first two points relate to language immersion programs for majority children.

First, advocates of foreign language instruction in the public schools might want to look much more closely at the late immersion approach as a very successful option, one which promotes literacy in the native language before that in the second language. Research in Canada indicates that such programs may be more efficient and time-effective in promoting literacy in the second language. Second, in early immersion programs (which may still be preferable to late immersion, for example, in promoting better attitudes toward the target culture), perhaps more attention should be given to manipulable, hands-on materials which would allow children to study first and second grade content in creative and innovative ways even with minimal second language proficiency. (Such hands-on materials might easily be adapted for younger LEP learners.) The point here is that our children are, after all, *learners*—not just second-language learners. Presenting interesting subject matter by means of creative hands-on materials

will surely facilitate *all* their learning.

Third, for those concerned more specifically about the fate of LEP students in our schools: the good news is that the research evidence at present indicates that English-only programs may be adequate for at least some LEP students: the age-group of students 8 to 12 who are literate in their native language. While bilingual programs might gain them a year or so, research studies indicate that this group suffers least in English-only programs.

But what of learners with no literacy skills in their native language (including younger learners) and adolescent learners? The research results here seem clear: it seems now that such learners should be in bilingual programs. In particular, in programs which promote literacy in the native language and which provide native-language instruction in content areas during the years when these learners are mastering school English. How can this instruction be provided?

Serious questions are raised here. For example, when speakers of Hmong are scattered throughout the district, how can each school provide content classes in Hmong? It would be far more economical to send all speakers of Hmong to the same school so that fewer content and NL reading teachers would have to hired district-wide. But what would it do to the concept of integration and racial balance to have all Spanish-speaking LEP students at one school, all Cambodian-speakers at another, and so on? Or even to concentrate all non-native speakers of English at one or two centers? Recently, the intensive ESL center at Highland Secondary Complex in St. Paul was disbanded because, as administrators put it, there were too many ESL students at the school. To meet racial quotas, it seems, LEP students were dispersed to schools throughout the district—where teachers were ill-prepared to meet their language needs and adequate funds were not provided to maintain services which had been available at Highland. School districts are legally mandated *both* to provide special language instruction to LEP students *and* to avoid violating racial balance guidelines, but it is extremely expensive to do both *well*. There are clear guidelines for what constitutes racial balance, but there are no similar guidelines stipulating what constitutes adequate language instruction for LEP students. To stay within a budget, in cases such as these, a school district may cut back on the quantity and quality of the special language instruction provided to LEP students. An interesting question here is this: is the goal of integration and racial balance indirectly preventing these minority children from obtaining needed instruction in literacy and content area skills which might otherwise be provided within the tight budgets of school districts? This is no small issue.

Here is another question: for LEP children outside the Twin Cities, what options are there? Where there are very small numbers of speakers of a given language, how can a district afford to provide any bilingual support services at all?

Some partial answers to these questions have been proposed in the Twin Cities. As with language immersion programs, creative hands-on materials might be developed for the teaching of content to LEP students in the first and second grades—material relying minimally on language and maximally on ma-

nipulation and demonstration of physical objects—construction of models of (e.g.) dinosaurs, solar systems or pirate ships, making of student 'books', 'chemistry' experiments with baking soda and vinegar and red dye to create lava for volcanic eruptions.

For LEP adolescents, some teachers are proposing that (lacking bilingual programs) special sections of content courses (sometimes called "sheltered" courses) ought to be offered—sections in which possibly the instructor might use simpler English sentence structure. Or an ESL course might be presented in tandem with a content course ("adjunct" or "paired" classes) where the two teachers could cooperate in the creation of course materials. It is an open question whether content-area instructors can be found who can modify their presentation in this way.

What if, for financial reasons, the schools will not provide appropriate instruction for LEP students in reading, writing and content areas? What can be done?

One option might be to educate and help the families and ethnic communities to organize somehow to provide after-school classes or home instruction for these learners. It does not, after all, matter *where* these students become literate in their native language, as long as they become literate. It does not matter *where* they obtain their content area knowledge, as long as they obtain it. Of course, this approach seemingly excuses the public schools from an obligation to provide basic education to these children. But if these were *my* children, I would feel that time was of the essence. I would not want to stand idly by while the school system tried to get itself organized. Local communities might have the resources to offer classes after school or on weekends which might make the difference between success and failure for these children. Families might be able to offer support for individual children; where one or more family members is literate in the native language, arrangements might be worked out with a child's teacher. For example, one family in the suburbs of the Twin Cities, which has adopted a non-literate Spanish-speaking 7-year-old, is planning to ask the child's teacher to provide on Fridays information about goals, worksheets and readings for the following week, so that the family can provide the child with relevant content information and reading in Spanish. But perhaps not many families have the resources to provide this sort of remedy.

So, finally, let us return to a consideration of the long-term obligation of the public school system to provide adequate language instruction for LEP learners. For many LEP students, native language reading and writing courses are needed. For many, content courses in the native language, or "adjunct" and "sheltered" courses, are needed. These and other curricular changes mentioned above will necessarily involve changes, of one kind or another. Attempts to provide adequate language instruction to LEP students most economically would involve a re-examination of the guidelines for racial balance in the schools. Attempts to provide such instruction *within those guidelines* will be much more expensive.

Expensive programs are of course unwelcome to educational administrators. But here we must hold firm: the expenditure of funds to foster the English language literacy of these students will have long-range benefits which will far outweigh short-term financial gains. Surely now, when so many are focusing upon the importance of education (we have an 'Education President') and of literacy, we should seek financial support from both public and private sectors to promote the cause of literacy for second-language learners. This is a serious challenge to our school system. ESL teachers will need to work creatively with content teachers to create new options for LEP learners and all of us will need to bring considerable pressure to bear upon both an educational system which seems resistant to this kind of change as well as course content with superficial and short-range goals. But the long-range welfare of a great many LEP students is at stake here. Our schools have an obligation to meet the long-range educational needs of these students, to make it possible for them to become truly literate in their L2 and to master school content in the L2. We know *how* to promote literacy in a second language. The big question now is—will we be *able to do it* in today's public schools?

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